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ABSTRACT

This document, which was developed to assist individuals working in publicly sponsored literacy programs in Georgia, offers instructional plans and practical strategies designed to help teachers empower their students of adult literacy, adult basic education, General Educational Development, and English as a second language. Detailed guidelines are provided for conducting three group learning activities devoted to the following topics: the history of voting rights in the United States and issues surrounding current laws prohibiting voting; the importance of participatory democracy, voting patterns, and evaluation of their implications; and political campaigning and advertisement and evaluation of the information presented in them. Each activity contains the following: overview and rationale; skills developed in the activity; steps in preparing for the activity; materials needed; detailed explanation of the steps entailed in conducting the activity; and discussion questions. Also included are student handouts for each activity, a brief discussion of whether politics belong in literacy classrooms, other ideas for teaching about voting, and a list of pertinent Internet resources. (MN)

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Are Your Students Politically Empowered?
Beyond Basic Skills
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Beyond Basic Skills

Innovative Teaching Materials for Georgia's Teachers of Adults

Volume 2, Number 3 Summer 1998

Beyond Basic Skills offers instructional plans and practical strategies designed for immediate use by teachers in Georgia's adult literacy, ABE, GED, and ESL programs. This issue focuses on **Learning about Politics and Voting**. We hope you'll find these activities useful.

Tom Valentine
Jenny Sandlin
Diane Vreeland

Are Your Students Politically Empowered?

When Americans read about turmoil and violence in other countries, many feel a sense of relief that they live here. We Americans take pride in our democracy, admitting its imperfections, but still preferring it to less democratic countries. After all, we learned in school that our country was run by a government that was "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

But not all Americans feel the same level of pride as they look at our government. Many members of less powerful groups in our society—including racial and ethnic minorities, undereducated people, and lower income groups—are not part of the democratic process in this country. People in these less powerful groups are seldom spoken to directly by politicians. They rarely see people who look like them or think like them either running for office or holding one. Many don't follow politics because their concerns and interests usually aren't represented in the political process.

Whether or not you fit this profile, you can bet that many of your students do. Many students in Georgia's adult literacy and ESL programs don't feel a sense of ownership of this country. Because of this, many don't vote. And because they don't vote, many politicians and policy makers do not feel the need to address their concerns.

But would our country be different if everyone voted? Admittedly, universal voting would not solve all of America's problems, but it could go a long way toward giving a voice to people whose needs and desires are generally ignored. Politicians would need to be more responsive to a new constituency—a constituency personally and deeply concerned about poverty, social welfare, and a variety of issues more important to society's "have-nots" than to its "haves."

If more of our students—and other members of historically less powerful groups in this country—voted, it could profoundly affect the way politicians talk about and act upon any number of issues. In current political discourse, the rhetoric surrounding different programs is telling. Think about the ways that many politicians talk about social programs that benefit lower-income groups, such as welfare. Often, the message to voters is "Don't worry. We'll stop spending your money on *them*."

Compare this to how many politicians talk about issues of importance to retired people, home owners, or corporations—groups that are known voters and who often have active and powerful lobbying groups. There is often a more respectful, even reverential message that goes: "Don't worry. We won't take away *your* money." Why are these messages so different? Because politicians know, both through research and instinct, just who the voters are—and who they are not.

If you want to help empower your learners for life in a true democracy, a good starting point is raising awareness about how our political system works. You can also work with students to develop strategies that will help them to watch out for their own political interests—including letting their voices be heard by voting.

This issue of *Beyond Basic Skills* is designed to let teachers play an active role in strengthening our democratic system by encouraging their students to "stand up and be counted." The first activity gives students a chance to learn about the history of voting in our country. The second activity presents statistics about who votes in this country and gives learners an opportunity to discuss why certain groups may vote more than others. It also highlights how elections can be won or lost by just a few votes. The third activity focuses on campaigns and political advertising and offers ideas about how to critically gather and evaluate information about candidates.

Each of these activities is designed to address the development of basic and higher order skills, while at the same time dealing with topics of considerable importance to all Americans. We hope that both you and your students will find them useful and intellectually stimulating.

Planning the Sessions

The activities in this issue are designed for group instruction. You might try teaching all three activities as part of a special workshop. Alternatively, the activities can stand alone and be integrated into regular classroom instruction. The time required for the activities will vary depending on your teaching style and the size of your group.

Activity #1: What if the Government Said You Couldn't Vote?

Overview and Rationale

Many of us take our right to vote for granted. But how would you feel if the government passed a law denying you the right to vote? Throughout the history of the United States, that's exactly what has happened to certain groups of people. State and federal governments have been instrumental in the past in denying different groups of people—including women, African Americans, young people, people who didn't own land and who couldn't pay poll taxes, and people who couldn't read and write—the right to vote. And throughout history these groups of people have organized, struggled, and fought for their right to vote.

This activity presents a brief history of voting rights in this country. Learners will read about and discuss the ways that people throughout history were prevented from voting. This activity will also provide a forum for learners to discuss some issues surrounding current laws prohibiting voting.

Skills Developed in this Activity

Critical reading, critical thinking, and critical discussion skills.

How to Prepare for this Activity

Read the passages contained in the handout and try to predict your learners' ability to understand them. Though you may take them for granted, some of the concepts used in this activity will need pre-teaching.

This is basically a reading and discussion activity. However, in order to help learners more fully understand the connection between the content of the reading passage and the way our government works, learners will first need to learn some background information. Although many of the concepts contained on the handout might be covered by the opening discussion, you should be prepared to define certain concepts such as "the Constitution" and "the amendment process." If your students are especially interested in how laws are made or want to more fully explore how the government works, you may even want to gather outside reference materials in order to teach these concepts and may want to plan extra sessions to explore some of these concepts in-depth. The extra time you put into this teaching will be well worth the effort. Learners will have a more thorough grasp of the way our governmental system works which will help them in not only more fully understanding the issues discussed in this activity, but also in studying for the GED. Gauge the level of understanding your learners have about these issues and plan accordingly.

Materials Needed for this Activity

✓ A copy of the handout entitled "Activity #1: What if the Government Said You Couldn't Vote?" for each learner (see page 5).

✓ Discussion questions for you (see box on this page entitled "Activity #1 Discussion Guide").

What To Do in the Session

1. Begin with a general discussion of what a democracy is and how it is different from other types of governments. Ask learners, "What does it mean to vote?" and "Who rules in a democracy?" Explain that in today's session we're going to look at some of the ways throughout history that people have been shut out of the democratic process.

2. Distribute the handout. Have learners read the introduction and the first section on women. Ask for volunteers to read the sections out loud while other learners read along, or read it aloud yourself if you have lower-level readers.

3. After the first section on women, engage in a discussion using the "*For Each Section*" discussion questions contained in the box on this page. Customize the questions to pertain to women.

4. Read through each section, stopping after each one to discuss the "*For Each Section*" discussion questions, customizing them to fit each group. After each discussion, go on to read and discuss the next passage until you get through all five passages about the different groups that had been denied the right to vote.

5. Finally, read the last passage about current restrictions on voting and engage in a general discussion using the "*General Discussion*" discussion questions in the box below.

Activity #1 Discussion Guide

For Each Section

Ask these questions about each of the five sections, inserting the name of each group:

1. How do you think this group felt when they were not allowed to participate in the voting process?
2. Who do you think denied this group the right to vote? Why would they want to do that?
3. Who might have helped this group fight for the vote? Who would have fought against it?
4. Do you think this group could ever have its right to vote banned again? Why or why not?

General Discussion

1. How might our country be different today if only white male property owners could vote?
2. How would our government be different in the same situation?
3. Some say that taking the right to vote from criminals is a racist policy. Why do you think people believe that? Do you agree? Why or why not? Do you think it is fair that released felons cannot vote? Why or why not?
3. Do you think foreign-born people who are permanent residents of the United States should be allowed to vote? Why or why not?

Activity #2: Who Votes?

Overview and Rationale

Our government was designed to be representative, run by leaders who would be elected by an informed citizenry. In recent years, however, turnout in national elections has averaged only 55% of the total voting age population. Of Georgians who were eligible to vote in 1996, only 42% went to the polls. In local races, turnout is even lower. Although the constitution and its amendments give almost every U.S. citizen the right to vote, many never use this right.

There is nothing random about who votes and who doesn't. Those who stay home on election day do not constitute a random sample of the general population. Rather, they are more likely to be less educated, economically disadvantaged, and members of racial and ethnic minority groups—groups which are well represented in adult literacy classrooms. These groups may feel shut out of a political system that is fueled by money and is run by people who are socially and economically quite far removed from them. But when people do not participate in the election process, they find themselves in a catch-22—they in essence become irrelevant to those who are elected. Some people consciously reject voting and have good reasons; others just don't bother to vote. Either way, they are giving up an important right that we all can exercise.

The intention of this activity is to examine the importance of participatory democracy. The reading activity in Part One is a newspaper article that illustrates how low voter turnout can have serious consequences in an election. The graphs in Part Two offer learners the opportunity to understand voting patterns and to evaluate their implications.

Skills Developed in this Activity

Critical reading, reading and interpreting graphs, critical thinking and discussion skills.

Materials Needed for this Activity

✓ A copy of the handout entitled "Activity #2: Who Votes?" (see page 6).

✓ Activity #2 Discussion Questions, including questions for Part One and Part Two (see box on this page).

How to prepare for this Activity

✓ Review the handout and try to predict your learners' ability to read and understand it.

✓ Decide if you need to pre-teach any vocabulary. Identify those words and decide the best way to define them for your learners.

What to Do in this Session

Part One

1. Start a discussion by asking for volunteers to talk about whether they are registered to vote and if they are planning to vote in the next election. If they are reluctant to discuss their own participation, ask what they have heard other people they know say about why they do or don't vote. Do these reasons make sense to them?
2. Distribute the handout. If you have strong readers in your group, have them take turns reading the newspaper article in Part One out loud; if not, read it aloud while learners follow along.
3. Ask learners to share their reactions to the story by asking the Part One discussion questions found in the box on this page.

Part Two

4. Have your students study the first graph.
5. Ask for one or more volunteers to explain how to read a graph. Help out as necessary.
6. Work with learners to extract facts from the graph in the form of simple sentences. (For example, "Most people in the lowest income category don't vote" or "The highest voter turnout is among those who make $50,000 or more a year.") Have individual learners share their sentences and write them on the board.
7. Go through the other two graphs in the same way. For example, a sentence gleaned from the middle chart could be: "College graduates are twice as likely to vote as those who have less than a high school education." Try to get everyone to participate in determining the facts that the graphs illustrate. When students share the sentences they created, ask them to explain why they thought those particular facts were important.
8. When learners have finished this process, engage them in a general discussion of the graphs using the Part Two discussion questions found in the box below.

Activity #2 Discussion Questions

Part One

1. Do you think that the town of Winterville got the best candidate?
2. What percentage of the registered voters actually voted for the winner?
3. Do people who do not vote have a right to complain about who gets elected?
4. How would our government be different if everyone voted? How would our country in general be different if everyone voted?

Part Two

1. What are these graphs about?
2. What does this data tell you?
3. For each graph: Are you surprised to see how the different groups compare?
4. Why do you think some groups are so unlikely to vote?
5. Which of these groups have the least power in the political process? Does this seem fair to you?

Activity #3: Learning about Campaigning and Political Ads

Overview and Rationale

Some people may argue that campaigning in this country has gotten out of control. The cost of running for office continues to skyrocket, and politicians and would-be politicians have to spend lots of time fund-raising to keep up with their opponents. In 1996 the average winning campaign for the House of Representatives cost over $673,000, while in the Senate that cost rose to $4.7 million dollars. Although many people are fighting to limit political contributions, the

money continues to pour in—from large corporations, labor unions, and wealthy individuals who are able to donate many thousands of dollars. Campaign money that isn't donated by the candidates themselves or by the Federal government can be divided into three main categories: business sources, labor unions, and ideological donors (donors who support specific causes such as gun control or anti-abortion legislation). The biggest source of money for elections is the business community, which in the last election donated 9 times as much as labor and 15 times as much as ideological donors. In all, business donors gave approximately $450,000,000 to candidates (63% went to Republicans), labor groups gave nearly 50 million dollars to candidates (92% were Democrats) and the ideological money totaled about $34,000,000 (52% went to Republicans).

Much of this campaign money is spent on television advertising—in the last election an estimated $440,000,000 was spent on TV ads. In addition, another estimated $150,000,000 was spent on "issue advocacy" ads which look and sound like campaign ads but that aren't subject to campaign contribution limits or disclosure requirements because they stop short of saying "elect" or "don't elect" a particular candidate.

There's big money in campaigns, and much of it is spent trying to win votes through TV ads. The first part of the activity is a reading passage that discusses campaigns in general and how money plays such a large part in the campaign process. The second part addresses the issue of political advertising and presents ways to "deconstruct" ads.

This activity is designed to be informative and fun. Most of us like to talk about what we see on TV, and this activity will involve active discussion of TV ads. This activity will also require you to do some work at home—watching political ads on TV and bringing in examples. If you have a TV/VCR at school, it would be helpful to record campaign ads at home and bring them into the classroom. If not, the class will watch them at home and will use those for the discussion.

Skills Developed in this Activity

Critical reading, media literacy, critical thinking, and critical discussion skills.

Materials Needed for this Activity

✓ A copy of the handout "Activity #3: Learning about Campaigning," for each learner (see page 7).

✓ Activity #3 Discussion Guide (see box on this page).

✓ VCR and video tape if available.

How to Prepare for this Activity

✓ Preview the passages contained on the handout and try to predict your learners' ability to read them. If you believe that you need to "pre-teach" selected vocabulary, identify those words and decide the best way to define them for your learners.

✓ Record several political ads at home and bring them into class. Try to find ads that illustrate the different special effects that are discussed in the handout. Use your imagination—this should be fun!

✓ If you do not have access to a TV/VCR in your class, there are other ways to conduct this activity. For instance, you can plan for you and your learners to all watch the same half hour of television and ask learners to take notes on the political ads that are aired. Let learners know that you will be using those ads in class.

✓ Preview the discussion guide in the box below, and adapt the questions based on your own worldview and what you know about your learners.

What to do in the Session

Part One

1. Before distributing the handout, begin a general discussion about political campaigns. Ask students how people campaign and if they think certain ways are better than others. Also ask them how much money they think people spend to get elected.
2. Read through Part One of the handout. If you have strong readers in your group, select several to read the passage out loud; if not, read aloud while students follow along.
3. Discuss the passage using the Part One discussion questions on this page.

Part Two

4. Begin with a general discussion about political ads. Ask students what kinds of information are provided in political ads. Do they learn a lot about candidates and their positions through ads?
5. As a group, read the first paragraph in Part Two of the handout. If you have strong readers in your group, select several to read; if not, read aloud while students follow along.
6. Have students read each question from the list on the handout and discuss them one at a time. Ask them if they can think of other examples for each question as you go down the list.
7. Now get the VCR ready or if you do not have access to a TV/VCR, use the ads that the class watched at home and took notes on. Use the questions on the handout to discuss each ad. After watching all of the ads you have brought, use the Part Two discussion questions to engage in a general discussion about the ads.

Activity #3 Discussion Guide

Part One

1. Do you think it's fair that it is so expensive to run for office? Why or why not?
2. Do you think you could run for office without money? If yes, how?
3. In the last activity you saw charts about which people are most and least likely to vote. Do you think there is a connection between how much money it takes to run for office and which people vote? Why or why not?
4. Should the campaigning process change? What changes would you like to see?

Part Two

1. Do you trust what you hear or read in political ads? Why or why not?
2. What kinds of information can you learn from political ads? Does this information help you make your decision about whom to vote for?
3. What are some other sources for getting information about political candidates and issues?

Activity #1: What If The Government Said You Couldn't Vote?

In modern America, almost everyone can vote who wants to. But it wasn't always that way! Here are some of the groups that have been blocked from voting over the past two hundred years.

1. **Women**. For many years only men were allowed to vote. Women were considered too emotional to make wise choices. It took 75 years of protesting before women won the right to vote through the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920.

2. **Poor People**. When this country was first founded, only people who owned land were allowed to vote. Law-makers believed that only property owners had enough at stake in the country to vote responsibly. By the early 1800s, the property requirement was replaced with a poll tax, which required citizens to pay a special fee in order to vote. Poll taxes were made illegal by the 24th amendment to the Constitution in 1964.

3. **Young People**. For many years, voting was restricted to adults 21 years and older in some states. During the Viet Nam War era, many people argued that if you were old enough to fight and die for your country, you were old enough to vote. The 26th amendment, passed in 1971, granted the right to vote to everyone 18 or older. In Georgia, though, 18 year olds could vote even before 1971.

4. **People Who Could Not Read And Write**. Early in America's history, some states only allowed people who could read or write to vote. State law makers believed that only people who could read and write could get the information they needed to make smart choices. Nowadays, there are many ways to get information that do not involve reading and writing. The 1965 Voting Rights Act banned literacy tests.

5. **African Americans**. The constitution did not specifically restrict voting to White people. But it stated that only freemen or people who were not slaves could vote. This made it illegal for most African Americans to vote until after the Civil War. The 15th amendment passed in 1870 allowed Black men (not women) to vote. After that, many states passed new laws to restrict African Americans from voting. Literacy tests, poll taxes, and intimidation were methods used to limit voting by African Americans. Southern states imposed a "grandfather" clause, which said that voters whose grandfathers had voted didn't have to take a literacy test. This benefited White men who could not read, because their grandfathers might have been able to vote. This did not help Black men, however, because their grandfathers would have been slaves and would not have been able to vote anyway. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 did away with all these restrictions on who could vote. It also set up a system to make sure that the new law would be followed.

Are There Still People in the United States Who Can't Vote?

Yes. Convicted criminals in Georgia and most other states can't vote. States vary as to whether they restore this right when people get out of jail. In some states, a criminal is allowed to vote again once the sentence is served. Mississippi requires a pardon by the governor before a released felon can vote. Also, people who live in the U.S. but are not citizens of this country cannot vote even though they may work and pay taxes here.

Activity #2: Who Votes?

Part One

This article first appeared in the
Editorials, Thursday, November 6, 1997
Athens Banner-Herald

Apathy wins by a landslide in Georgia voting Tuesday

The importance of just one or two votes was vividly demonstrated in two municipal elections in North Georgia on Tuesday.

In Winterville, the initial tally showed City Council candidates Don Brown and William Orr each receiving 120 votes. A recount gave Orr the victory, 120 to 119.

In McDonough, south of Atlanta, challenger Richard Craig defeated incumbent Mayor Bill Copeland by two votes.

Unfortunately, voter turnout in both McDonough and Winterville was poor. In Winterville, only 32 percent of the city's registered voters showed up at the polls. These two examples demonstrate the importance of each of us taking our civic responsibilities seriously.

Certainly candidate Brown is painfully aware of that obligation. Had one more of his supporters gone to the polls and cast a ballot for him, he'd be in a runoff election with Orr in a few weeks.

The apathy problem is not limited to these two towns. Returns from municipal elections all over Georgia show turnouts ranging from a low 18 percent in Albany to a high of 55 percent on Tybee Island.

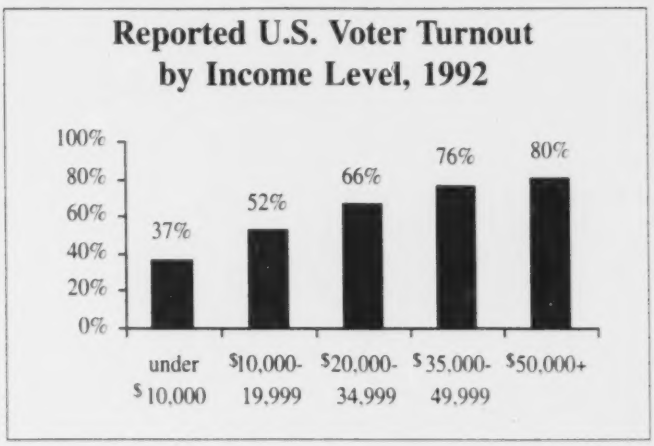
When the vote is on issues rather than candidates, the turnout often is even lower. Only 16.3 percent and 17.2 percent of the voters, respectively, went to the polls Tuesday in Oglethorpe and Madison counties where 1 percent sales taxes for education were approved.

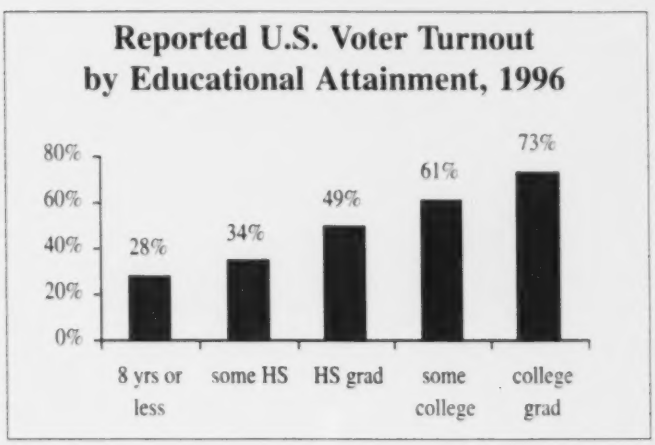
The 80 percent and more of registered voters in the two counties who didn't bother to voice their opinions will have few grounds to complain about higher taxes.

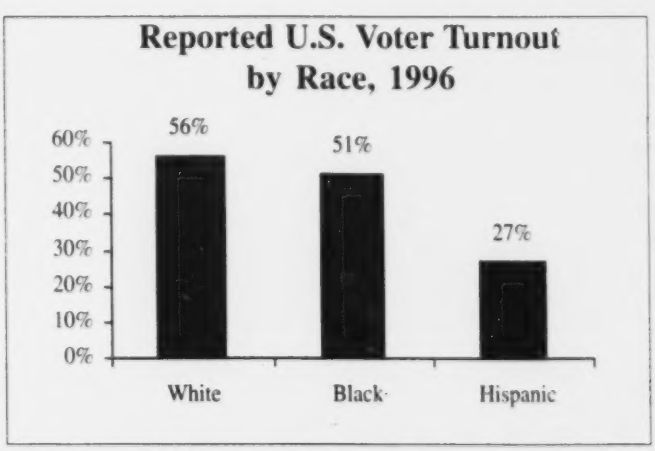
If someone tried to take away our vote, we Americans would be up in arms.

Yet we allow ourselves to be disenfranchised, not by some sinister political plot, but by a threat far more real, the stupefying impact of apathy.

Part Two







source for all graphs: U.S. Bureau of the Census

Activity #3: Learning About Campaigning

Part One: What is a Campaign?

A campaign starts when two or more people decide to run for the same office. When people campaign, they try to win the support of voters so that they can be elected. People campaign in many ways, including speaking to crowds in person, going door to door, hosting dinners, and buying advertising. Campaigning can take up a lot of a person's time.

In the United States, campaigns cost a lot of money, and it can be very expensive to run for office. In the last Presidential election, Bill Clinton and Bob Dole each spent more than 100 million dollars in their campaigns. Where does the money for campaigns come from? Some money is supplied by the candidates themselves, but most isn't. Candidates are usually affiliated with political parties that give them money for campaigns. Some of the money for campaigns is supplied by the government. And other donations come from individuals and groups who give money to candidates that they think represent their interests. These include individual voters, political action committees, businesses, corporations, and labor unions.

Part Two: Political Advertising

What is all of this money used for? A big chunk of it is spent on political advertising in newspapers, magazines, and on television. This is the major way that voters get information about candidates. But this information might not always be trustworthy. Because free speech is protected by the U.S. Constitution, candidates can say anything they want in political advertising. But the content is not the only thing to watch out for. Ads also try to influence you by using special effects that they hope will cause you to feel certain ways about the candidates. Let's try to recognize these special effects so we won't be fooled by ads! Here are some questions to ask yourself when you see political ads:

1. **Where is the candidate?** Is he sitting behind a desk? Is she standing in a corn field? Different backgrounds are used to communicate different messages. For instance, a candidate sitting behind a desk is trying to convey authority and seriousness.

2. **What props are used in the ad?** Do you see a flag? Is there a podium? Maybe there are children in the ad. How about a newspaper headline? Props are used to convey certain meanings. For instance, candidates use flags as symbols of patriotism.

3. **What music is playing?** Is it loud or soft? Music sets the mood of an ad. For instance, ads attacking an opponent sometimes use music from horror movies to sound menacing.

4. **What is the candidate doing?** Is she greeting young children? Is he sitting with family? Is she getting off a plane? Actions also convey meanings. For example, a candidate shown talking with family members creates an image of warmth and caring.

5. **What is the camera doing?** Is there slow motion? Are there extreme close-ups? These camera tricks also create candidate images. For instance, close-ups are used to make us believe that what the candidate is saying is very important.

Does Politics Belong in Your Classroom?

Many literacy teachers believe that politics has no place in their classrooms. Maybe it's because teachers believe that as public employees they have no right to get involved in politics. Because of this they avoid any mention of politics in their classrooms.

We're not advocating for any candidate, party, or political philosophy, and we're certainly not suggesting that you use your power as a teacher to try to sway students to vote your way. These activities will work whether you are a member of the Republican party, the Democratic party, the Libertarian Party, or no party at all.

In teaching these activities, we urge you to make room for the variety of opinions your students might hold. By encouraging students to voice their opinions and get involved in the political process, you'll be strengthening our democracy.

Internet Resources

- For more information about the connection between money and political campaigns, check out the "Coin-op Congress" site: http://bsd.mojones.com/coinop_congress/ or the Center for Responsive Politics at http://www.crp.org
- For information on candidates, classroom materials, resources on political television ads, and more, check out the PBS Democracy 98 site at http://www.pbs.org/election98
- You can get a Vote Smart Guide to the world wide web and learn about over 13,000 political leaders at Project Vote Smart: http://www.vote-smart.org/

Other Ideas for Teaching About Voting

- Explain to learners how to register to vote. Obtain registration forms from your local county/city clerk's office or the Board of Elections and Registration. If you need a large quantity, you can order them from the Georgia Secretary of State's office. Teach learners how to fill them out. Be sure to explain how the "Motor Voter" registration process works. "Motor Voter" registration is available at Georgia State Patrol offices but only when renewing or making a change to a driver's license.
- Explain to learners what primaries are and how they work.
- Obtain copies of the sample ballot from the county clerk's office. They are usually available about a month before the elections, and in some areas are published in the local newspaper. Teach learners how to read a ballot.
- Have learners talk about the voting booth and how it works. For someone who has never tried to vote, the voting place can seem like foreign ground.
- Contact the League of Women Voters to see if they provide free guest speakers or materials. The League is committed to democratic participation by *all* Americans, not just women. You can find them on the web at http://www.lwv.org

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